



I'm not a robot

























A sexual assault can create an urgent to-do list: To start, protect the victim from future assault, contact law enforcement, prevent possible pregnancy and check for sexually transmitted infections. But even if these stressful short-term concerns are resolved, many people continue to struggle with the lingering effects of sexual abuse or assault for months or years. Shweta Kapoor, M.D., Ph.D., a Mayo Clinic psychiatrist with expertise in complex trauma, has witnessed the long-term impacts of sexual violence on emotional and mental health. She explains how sexual violence can lead to trouble regulating emotions, a loss of sense of self, dissociation, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions. Experiencing sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse is common, especially among girls and women. Racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ individuals also are at higher risk of sexual violence. These groups, along with immigrants and undocumented individuals, also may find it harder to receive care after victimization because of language and cultural barriers, lack of insurance, location of resources, and lack of services directed toward populations like queer men. Sexual assault can be defined as sexual activity without consent. That could be rape or attempted rape, anal sex, oral sex, fondling or groping. Sexual abuse of children includes these forms of sexual assault as well as abuse without actual touch — like exposing oneself to a child, showing a child pornography or having sexual conversations. It's hard to know exactly how common sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse are, for the simple reason that many children and adults don't report the abuse. Still, there are some estimates about how often these abuses happen: A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey found that 27% of women and 4% of men reported being victims of rape or attempted rape. That same CDC survey found that almost half of women and almost a quarter of men have received unwanted sexual contact — which means there was touching but not penetration. In the U.S., it's estimated that over 60,000 children are sexually abused each year. When sexual abuse or assault happens repeatedly, it can lead to complex trauma. There are many possible physical, sexual, emotional and mental effects of sexual trauma. But people who've been traumatized may not necessarily make the connection between their history and their current struggles. "A lot of times if you ask them, 'Have you ever experienced trauma in your life?' they probably don't even recognize it. Because trauma has been an indelible part of their life since childhood. They don't know that it's trauma, they think this is normal and happens to everyone," Dr. Kapoor says. As a psychiatrist, she asks questions like, "Are there things that your mind keeps going back to? Are there things you keep dreaming about?" Part of her job is to help people understand their life stories and how what happened to them affects who they are today. Sexual trauma may contribute to a loss of sense of self, emotional dysregulation, or mental health problems such as obsessive-compulsive disorder or borderline personality disorder. Our families play a major role in the formation of our identities. But all too often, the abuser of a child is a close relative or someone they are familiar with. (1) There's often simultaneous emotional abuse, with the perpetrator shifting blame to the victim. Dr. Kapoor says. "Perpetrators may say things like, 'I'm not doing anything bad to you, you're just making it out to be sexual. This is how I love you, that's why I'm touching you,'" says Dr. Kapoor. "Imagine getting those messages from people who you really trust. Over time, you start to believe that you're making it up and start losing your sense of self and self-worth." If you're a parent, you know that self-soothing is a life-changing (and sleep-saving) skill for infants and toddlers. You may not realize that it goes way beyond cuddling a stuffed animal or preventing a tantrum in the grocery store — it can be important for coping with adult life as well. When life delivers frustrations, disappointments, sleep deprivation and stress, many people are ultimately able to cope by using self-soothing skills they learned as a child. They may still snap at their partner or kids or have the occasional sob in the shower, but by and large, they self-soothe, or regulate, their emotions. Some people who have experienced repeated sexual abuse aren't able to regulate their emotions well. Even something seemingly very small — like a minor frustration, loss or innocuous comment — can cause an emotional explosion. This is often called emotional dysregulation. "Due to their experience of early life adversity, they have much lower distress tolerance," says Dr. Kapoor. "If anything stressful comes up ... they can go from zero to 100 in a second." A child who has been sexually abused is deprived of developing healthy responses to stress and trauma later in life, she says. Some people who have experienced sexual assault or abuse may sometimes feel like the people and world around them are unreal, foggy or dreamlike — a phenomenon known as derealization. Or their actions and thoughts seem to be happening to another person or like they're watching them from the outside — known as depersonalization. Both are forms of dissociation. "It's your brain's way of protecting you when you get triggered," says Dr. Kapoor. "If it's too overwhelming, your brain steps in to protect you, leading to dissociative experiences." Dissociation can be debilitating, impairing an individual's psychological quality of life and sense of safety, she says. Experiencing abuse or assault also can contribute to other mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Some people may experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Traumatic life events are a possible risk factor for OCD, a disorder marked by unwanted thoughts, fears and repetitive behaviors meant to allay those thoughts and fears. People with OCD may spend hours each day caught in obsessions and compulsive behaviors. "When you're sexually abused as a child, an adolescent or even as an adult, it's a feeling of being out of control, right?" Dr. Kapoor says. "OCD is very much like you're now taking control of your life, but it goes too far. It becomes impairing for you, but you can't stop." Additionally, Dr. Kapoor says women who are victims of abuse and experience trauma reactions, including severe emotional dysregulation, often get diagnosed with borderline personality disorder — a terminology she believes further stigmatizes the child sexual abuse survivor. "Once you get labeled with borderline, your trauma reactions are seen as a personality flaw, something you should fix, and not due to something that happened to you," she says. While there are common potential consequences of sexual abuse, Dr. Kapoor says that trauma reactions in context of childhood sexual abuse are not personality flaws. Dr. Kapoor emphasizes: "It's something that happened to you. It's a part of your life story but it is not you." People with a history of sexual trauma may be hypervigilant and have a strong startle reaction. Certain triggers may lead to memories or flashbacks, causing them to shut down or emotionally react, including during sex. "Touch in the present can remind them of the past touch. So, in a second, their brain flashes back to their childhood, triggering dissociation," Dr. Kapoor says. "They're not able to differentiate that this touch is a safe and loving touch." It can be very helpful for individuals with a history of abuse and their partners to identify such triggers, Dr. Kapoor says. If you are a partner of such an individual, asking questions like, "What kinds of touch trigger you? What body parts seem to lead to distressing reactions?" can help. "I always tell my patients that there is no definitive cure for it. But how you process the trauma can be helped by learning coping skills and understanding your story," says Shweta Kapoor, M.D., Ph.D. Relevant reading Mayo Clinic Guide to Home Remedies An easy-to-use self-care guide for managing more than 130 common health conditions safely at home. Will drinking orange juice help prevent kidney stones? Is it true you can get rid of bad breath by chewing parsley? Does caffeine improve or worsen a headache? Today, greater responsibility is being placed on... At this point, you're not sure how to help your cousin. She had a rough childhood with an abusive dad and has been struggling ever since, falling into bad relationship after bad relationship. You suspect she's drinking to deal with her life.You've offered her help, support and advice, but it never seems to sink in. She may break up with one boyfriend, but then she gets together with another abusive man. What's going on with her? How can you help?Many people are familiar with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which occurs after a terrifying event. Your cousin, on the other hand, is likely dealing with complex trauma, which develops after repeated exposure to trauma over a long period of time. Complex trauma begins in childhood or adolescence and can include multiple types of traumas, such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or neglect. Often, the abusers are not strangers and may even be related to the child. The perpetrators commonly use intimidation and threats of violence to keep the victims quiet.When girls exposed to complex trauma grow up to be women, they may find themselves in abusive relationships. Unsurprisingly, these "layers and layers" of trauma have adverse emotional, mental and physical consequences, says Shweta Kapoor, M.D., Ph.D., a Mayo Clinic psychiatrist with expertise in complex trauma. "Complex trauma really disrupts a child's life trajectory. It adversely impacts their self-image, their attachment styles, how they interact with the world around them, their relationships with others and their relationship with themselves," Dr. Kapoor says. People who have been through complex trauma often experience severe emotional pain, depression and anxiety as adults. They may also experience:Lack of self-esteem and sense of self. This is often related to abuse. For example, if a parent or authority figure repeatedly tells their daughter that they'll never amount to anything, she'll probably come to believe it, says Dr. Kapoor. Women with complex trauma may struggle to understand who they actually are compared to the messages they've heard.Dissociation. When something terrible happens to you, you may hate thinking about it so much that you start to disassociate, Dr. Kapoor says. This can mean feeling like the people and world around you are unreal, foggy or dreamlike (derealization). It can also mean feeling that your actions and thoughts are happening to another person or like you're watching them in a movie (depersonalization).Substance abuse. It can be difficult for women with complex trauma to be alone with their thoughts. They may routinely use substances or alcohol to avoid or numb emotional pain and negative thoughts and feelings. Dr. Kapoor will often ask, "Can you be alone with yourself at night without a glass of wine or any medication?"Abusive relationships. Women with complex trauma may end up in a repeated pattern of abusive relationships with romantic partners, Dr. Kapoor says. This could be sexual, physical or emotional abuse.Physical symptoms. Complex trauma can manifest as physical symptoms and health problems, including fibromyalgia, which is strongly associated with a history of trauma. Gastrointestinal issues, such as irritable bowel syndrome, are also common with trauma history and exacerbated by stress. Acid reflux, functional neurological disorders, migraines and chronic fatigue syndrome are other health problems that may be an issue for those with complex trauma.When a woman repeatedly finds herself in abusive relationships, some people blame the woman. The woman might even blame herself and wonder, Why am I so bad at choosing partners? Dr. Kapoor says."It's not that simple. For women who have experienced trauma as children, their self-esteem is severely affected, and they may lack a secure sense of self. Oftentimes they fall into a pattern of self-negating thoughts that they do not deserve any better. Although they may be in an abusive relationship, it is scarier to leave. They may think, 'If I don't have this person, what do I have?'" Dr. Kapoor says. "This leads to a vicious cycle of abusive relationships and more traumatization."A lot of times we are just looking for someone to tell us that we are enough. It's common to keep falling into relationships thinking, "This one is going to be better."It's also important to recognize the economic and cultural pressures women face that may keep them in abusive relationships. Not being able to afford your own apartment or being a part of a culture where divorce is strongly stigmatized are big reasons to stay put.Right now, there's no official diagnosis for complex trauma. Some with complex trauma may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but Dr. Kapoor believes the diagnostic criteria for PTSD often misses women with complex trauma.When women are screened for PTSD, they may be asked if they have experienced a traumatic event, says Dr. Kapoor."I think where PTSD falls short is that a lot of people do not automatically relate to the idea of one traumatic event," says Dr. Kapoor.And sometimes women may not even realize that what they experienced could be considered traumatic, Dr. Kapoor says, especially as some forms of trauma may have been normalized. For example, if you were raised in the 60s, your parents may have hit you as a form of punishment. However, because corporal punishment was more common at the time, you might not connect that history with any of your emotional problems several decades later as an adult.Because, so far, there's no official diagnosis that describes complex trauma, some physicians consider the concept of complex trauma controversial or reject it outright. However, Dr. Kapoor is earnestly hoping for a formal definition and characterization of complex trauma in the future versions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). An official diagnosis can help those with complex trauma receive validation that the symptoms they experience are real."It's not something that they're imagining," she says.It would also promote understanding of the symptoms, provide diagnostic clarity and help in the development of targeted interventions for complex trauma, she says.Another drawback of not having an official diagnosis for complex trauma: There are not many robust and validated treatments for it."I think that is why there has been a big push toward recognizing complex trauma as a more identifiable and recognized diagnosis," she says. "It is very challenging to systematically come up with interventions until you can clearly define and characterize the condition and gather a better understanding of what you are treating."However, some treatments traditionally utilized for PTSD are known to be helpful. These include:Trauma-informed care. This is a holistic treatment approach where an individual's life experiences and adverse childhood events are taken into account to understand and address their current physical and emotional challenges.Medications. Antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications may be helpful in treating coexisting anxiety, depression, sleep and concentration problems.Psychotherapy. Long-term intensive psychotherapy is often very beneficial in processing complex trauma. Types of therapy include exposure therapy, cognitive processing therapy, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing.If you're looking to learn more about how trauma affects health, Dr. Kapoor says the popular book "The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma" by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., is a good place to start. You can also check out the websites of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Health Service. Relevant reading Pregnancy Gift Bundle Mayo Clinic Guide to a Healthy Pregnancy is the ultimate guidebook for navigating the road to parenthood, with everything you need to know along the way to help you have a healthy pregnancy and baby. This inclusive, updated manual is packed with research-backed advice for every part of the journey,... Discover more Women's Health content from articles, podcasts, to videos. View Women's Health